Bo Hu, Anne West

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Exam-Oriented Education and Implementation of Education Policy for Migrant Children in Urban China

Bo Hu[1] **Anne West**[2]

Abstract

This paper investigates the implementation of education policy for migrant children in urban China. Historically, rural and urban residents in China were separated by the *hukou* system, and rural children were not allowed to attend urban schools. Since the relaxation of the *hukou* system in the early 1980s, large numbers of rural families migrated to cities. The right of migrant children to an education in urban China was formally recognised by the government in a series of policies starting in 2001. The research reported here reveals that migrant children did not have equal access to urban schools, nor did they enjoy an equally good education to that of urban children. Based on 53 in-depth interviews with school principals, teachers and pupils in two provincial capitals in China, this paper explores the main factors affecting the implementation of education policy for migrant children. The research demonstrates that policies relating to equal admissions criteria were not implemented as intended, with migrant children not having equal access to schools. However, policies relating to non-segregation and academic support were implemented as intended. It is argued that, at the school level, this is a result of the examination-oriented system, and schools' responses to this.

Key Words: Policy Implementation; Exam-Oriented Education; Rural-Urban Migration; Equal Opportunity in Education; China; High-Stakes Testing

[1] Correspondence author. Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU), Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: b.hu@lse.ac.uk

[2] Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has undergone rapid urbanisation over the past three decades. Historically, the Chinese population was divided into rural and urban residents via the Household Registration system (the *hukou* system) whereby people were either registered as rural or urban residents according to their place of birth. Migration from rural to urban areas was strictly controlled and mostly prohibited. In 1985, controls on migration were relaxed by the Chinese government (National People's Congress, 1985). This relaxation resulted in urban areas developing much faster than rural areas, with a huge economic gap between them emerging. For example, in 2012, the annual disposable income of an urban resident was on average ($3,937), more than three times higher than that of a rural resident ($1,269) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013). As a consequence, large numbers of rural residents have migrated to cities each year to seek better job opportunities since the relaxation of the *hukou* system.

The relaxation of the *hukou* system does not, however, guarantee migrants an equal social status to urban residents. First, migrants are required to apply for a temporary residence certificate after they move to cities (National People's Congress, 1985; Ministry of Public Security, 1995), so as to distinguish migrants from urban residents holding urban *hukou*. Second, migrants do not enjoy the same social welfare as urban residents; for example, social security benefits are provided to urban residents but not to migrants who hold temporary residence certificates (Hussain, 2003).

Moreover, because more and more migrants bring their families with them, the number of migrant children in cities has increased massively (Li, 2006). The most recent survey of 12 Chinese cities shows that on average migrant children accounted for 30% of the children living in these cities (Tian and Wu, 2010). Education for migrant children has raised serious concerns in China. Research has demonstrated that migrant children and urban children are not treated equally in urban schools. In particular, some migrant children have been educated in separate classes, charged higher tuition fees (Zhou, 1998; Ci and Li, 2003), ignored by teachers in classes or simply denied access to schools (Feng, 2007; Feng and Zhang, 2008). Since 2001, the Chinese central government has formulated a series of policies aimed at promoting "equal opportunity" for migrant children in urban schools. However, ensuring the effective implementation of these policies remains a major challenge for the Chinese government.

This paper examines the implementation of education policy for migrant children in urban China. It sets out to answer two research questions. First, what are the factors affecting the implementation of education policy for migrant children? Second, has this policy been effectively implemented?

Policy implementation in this paper is defined as the efforts by various policy actors to achieve the pre-designated goals of public policy (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Hill, 1993; O'Toole, 1997). Policy implementation is conceptualised as a process: a collection of decisions and actions by the various parties involved that may affect the achievement of policy goals. The extent to which policy goals can be achieved is an issue of implementation success or failure. If the policy goals are successfully

achieved, the policy can be seen to have been effectively implemented (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984).

The next two sections of the paper provide a brief overview of the basic education system in China and an analysis of education policy for migrant children. The policy is broken down into school admissions policy, non-segregation policy and academic support policy. This is followed by a review of the literature on the implementation of education policy for migrant children and a description of the data collection and analysis. The research findings are then discussed. The final section summarises the research findings and discusses their theoretical and policy implications. The central argument is that the examination-oriented system is the most important force shaping the results of policy implementation: it compromises the implementation of school admissions policy, but facilitates the implementation of non-segregation and academic support policies.

Basic Education in China

Basic education in China spans 12 years, including six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education and three years of senior secondary education. Junior secondary and senior secondary schools in China are also known as middle schools and cater for children aged 12 to 18 years of age[3]. The first nine years of basic education (i.e. primary and junior secondary education) is compulsory (Chan et al., 2008). Both parents and the government must make sure that children receive nine years of education; failure to do so is a violation of the *Compulsory Education Law of the PRC* (National People's Congress, 1986; National People's Congress, 2006).

[3] Middle schools are thus broadly equivalent to secondary schools in England (which cater for 11 to 18 year olds).

At the end of the primary and junior secondary education, every pupil must take a standardised "graduation examination". Those pupils who pass the examination can progress to the next level of education. Parents in China believe education to be very important, so encourage their children to obtain high scores in their examinations (Lu et al., 2007); this resonates with the findings by Francis and Archer (2005) who found that Chinese families in England value education highly, and the findings by the Department of Education (2013) which found that pupils of Chinese origin are the highest performers in public examination at the age of 16 in England. Some schools which perform well in the graduation examinations are oversubscribed and these schools often set up entrance examinations and decide their own admission scores for applicants. Only those pupils who score above the prescribed admission scores are accepted by these schools (Chan et al., 2008). It should, however, be noted that the use of entrance examinations in junior secondary schools was prohibited in the 2006 *Compulsory Education Law* (National People's Congress, 2006, Article 12).

Before 2006, funding for compulsory education was jointly shouldered by the government and parents. In principle, local governments paid for a majority of the tuition fees, while the parents paid for the rest, often a small amount of money known as miscellaneous fees (*zafei*) (National People's Congress, 1986, Article 10). The 2006 *Compulsory Education Law* cancelled these miscellaneous fees (National People's Congress, 2006, Article 2). Since then, compulsory education was supposed to be completely free.

Education for Migrant Children: A Review and Analysis of Policy

Until the early 2000s there were no laws or regulations to protect migrant children's right to education in cities. Urban schools could refuse to accept these children if they so wished. In 2001, the State Council of the PRC[4] stated that "migrant children should be educated in urban schools…[and] their right to education should be protected" (Article 12). Since then, a series of laws and regulations have been enacted. A key term which appeared again and again in education policy for migrant children is "equal opportunity" in urban schools (Qu and Wang, 2008, pp.180-181). However, the exact meaning of "equal opportunity" differs from one piece of legislation to another.

In 2003, the State Council published the *Notification on Further Improving Management and Services Related to Migrants*. This regulation required local schools to treat migrant and urban children equally in school admissions. "The host governments should take various measures to make sure migrant children can study in full-time urban schools, and the school admissions criteria should be the same as those for urban children" (State Council, 2003a, Article 6). In the same year, the State Council published the *Advice on Improving Education of Rural to Urban Migrant Children*. This is the only advice exclusively addressing the issue of education for migrant children. There are two themes relating to "equal opportunity" in this regulation. First, it suggests local schools provide help to those migrant children who have difficulties in their studies.

[4] The State Council of PRC, namely the central government of PRC, is the central administrative authority in China. It is responsible for implementing the laws passed by the National People's Congress (NPC) which is the supreme legislation body in China. The State Council is granted by the NPC with separate powers to legislate, but its legislation has lower legal validity and usually takes the form of regulations, notifications or recommendations. This means that if the regulations formulated by the State Council are in contradiction with the laws published by the National People's Congress, what is stipulated in the latter is regarded as valid and thus must be followed.

> Local schools should provide good education to migrant children…[,] get to know the academic needs of migrant children…[and] help them adjust to the new study environment as soon as possible. (State Council, 2003b, Article 4).

Second, it requires urban schools to treat urban and migrant children equally when charging tuition fees. "Local governments should set out the fees structure for migrant children, so that migrant and urban children pay the same fees" (State Council, 2003b, Article 6).

In 2006, the State Council published another regulation: *Some Advice on Solving the Problems related to Rural to Urban Migrants*. The government required local schools to treat urban and migrant children equally in terms of educational provision within the school. In particular, migrant children should enjoy the same status as urban children. Local schools were not allowed to place migrant children in separate classes or assess the examination results of migrant children separately as they had done before 2001 (State Council, 2006, Article 21).

As discussed above, the new *Compulsory Education Law* cancelled the entrance examinations to junior secondary education (National People's Congress, 2006, Article 12) and the miscellaneous fees (National People's Congress, 2006, Article 2). This implies that urban schools should use the same school admissions criteria for migrant and urban children. First, both migrant and urban children are entitled to study in urban schools without taking entrance examinations. Second, both groups of children should enjoy free compulsory education in urban schools. Migrant children should not pay any fees.

Equality of opportunity in education is a highly contested notion, and often has different meanings in different contexts (West and Nikolai, 2013). It may refer to equality of resources allocated to schools (Coleman, 1975), equality of access (e.g. a certain type of schools or a certain level of education being open to all pupils) (Nash, 2004), equality of process (e.g. pupils studying in the same classes within schools) (UNESCO, 1960), or equality of outcome (e.g. all pupils achieving a certain standard) (Guiton and Oakes, 1995). With regard to education policy for migrant children, this sought to ensure equality of access to urban schools in the sense that migrant and urban children were supposed to be subject to the same school admissions criteria (State Council, 2003a; State Council, 2003b; National People's Congress, 2006), and equality of process in education in the sense that migrant and urban children should study in the same classes (i.e. non-segregation) and go through the same assessment system (State Council, 2003a; State Council, 2006). Equality of outcome was not one of the policy goals, but the government did require urban schools to help those migrant children who have difficulties in their studies (State Council, 2003b).

A notable characteristic of these laws and regulations is that they are all lacking in strong incentives for implementation. The central government required urban schools to take specific measures or achieve specific policy goals. However, there were no sanctions or rewards attached to these policy goals. If local governments chose not to follow the requirements or failed to achieve the policy goals, there would be no negative consequences for them. As we shall see, this has important implications for the implementation of education policy for migrant children.

Literature Review

There has been a long and heated debate on policy implementation which dates back to the 1970s (O'Toole, 1986; O'Toole, 2000) . In particular, scholars are divided in their views as to the factors that affect effective implementation. On the one hand, some (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975; Sabatier, 1979; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984) have argued that effective implementation should be based on the clear formulation of policy goals, careful planning of procedures and coordination of policy actors at the level of central government. On the other hand, others (Elmore, 1979; Lipsky, 1980, Hjern and Portter, 1981) have pointed out the complexity of local reality and the inability of central government to foresee what might in fact happen on the ground, and thus suggest that effective implementation results from those implementing policy at the local level being allowed to make their own decisions to overcome specific challenges or meet local demands.

In parallel to the debates on policy implementation in general, there are two schools of thought in relation to implementation of education policy and school curriculum: fidelity perspective and adaptive perspective (Berman, 1980; Cho, 1998). The former supports the idea that teachers should strictly adhere to the curriculum as this is developed by experts. With this approach, quantifiable measures or outcome variables are generally devised to help evaluate the extent to which a curriculum has been successfully implemented (Lee and Chue, 2013). In comparison, the latter perspective has argued that successful implementation of a curriculum relies on a process where teachers make adaptations to the curriculum to "[reduce] the gap between an ideal implementation goal and the given local context" (Cho, 1998, p.5) and policy makers modify policy goals in response to teachers' feedback (Morris and Adamson, 2010,

p.180). In other words, curriculum implementation is regarded as a mutual adaptive process between teachers and policy makers (Mclaughlin, 1990, p.12).

Closely aligned to the adaptive perspective is a third perspective, that of curriculum implementation or the 'enactment perspective' (Snyder et al., 1992). This emphasises the importance of interactions between teachers and students in the classroom, which results in a curriculum being redefined and reinterpreted during the course of classroom interactions. In this case, teachers have more freedom than in the adaptive perspective to implement the curriculum and can even be regarded as active 'creators' of new education policies and curriculum (Short and Burke, 1991). Indeed, using this perspective, implementation tends to lose its traditional meaning of achieving policy goals, because policy goals become irrelevant once teachers and students start interpreting a curriculum in a way that is totally different from policy makers' intentions (Cho, 1998, p.6).

To date no research in English discussing the implementation of education policy for migrant children in China has been identified. With regard to Chinese literature, there is only a limited number of academic work, with one monograph and three academic articles that use empirical evidence to investigate this topic (Zhou, 2006; Qian and Geng, 2007; Zhou, 2007; Li, 2009).

Two points are worth noting in existing literature. First, all the studies focused on the policy relating to school admissions. None of them examined the implementation of non-segregation and academic support policies. Both Zhou (2006, 2007) and Li (2009) found that it was still very difficult for migrant children to study in urban schools,

even though the government policy had aimed to tackle this issue. They both attributed this to insufficient financial capacity of local governments. The central government established the policy, but did not provide financial resources for policy implementation. Local governments were reluctant to assume the financial burden of policy implementation, so they applied double standards in school admissions and excluded some migrant children from urban public education (Zhou, 2006, p.27; Li, 2009, p.17). Qian and Geng (2007) also focused on school admissions policy only, and reached the same conclusion. But they attributed this to the *hukou* status of migrant children. They pointed out that migrant and urban families had been separated by the *hukou* system for decades. Therefore, migrant families were ignored by local governments once they arrived in cities, and education policy for migrant children was not taken seriously by local governments.

Second, all these works investigated policy implementation at the government level. None of them looked at policy implementation at the school level. In fact, schools and teachers, as street level bureaucrats, are crucial actors while the education policies are being implemented. The importance of "street level bureaucrats" in policy implementation is well established; thus, it has been noted that teachers can "decide who will be suspended and who will remain in school' (Lipsky, 1980, pp.13-14). In some cases, schools themselves can decide who will be admitted, and who will be denied access to the schools (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). In this sense, schools do not merely carry out the tasks assigned by the governments. Instead, they have their own interests, goals, values and judgement, and can make their own decisions. Put differently, because of their autonomy, they can exercise discretionary power when implementing education policies. Such discretionary behaviours of schools can be an

important force shaping the process and results of policy implementation (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984, p.198).

On the basis of the above literature review, this paper will take forward discussions on the implementation of education policy for migrant children in two ways. First, it will investigate the three major issues covered in the education policy for migrant children. This aims to provide a more comprehensive evaluation on policy implementation. Second, the analyses will focus on those factors affecting the decisions made by schools, and the consequences of these school-level decisions.

Research Methods

The fieldwork took place in two provincial cities in China in 2009, and involved semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders involved in the process of policy implementation. Both cities are provincial capitals, and attract a large number of migrant families each year. For example, 20% of the school-age children in city B were children of migrants. The data was collected with the help of the Development Research Centre (DRC) of the State Council, a think tank of Chinese central government.

Given the costs and limited time available, purposive sampling was used to select interviewees (Silverman, 2010). Interviewees were selected on the basis that they were most likely to provide the information needed to answer the research questions. For instance, in order to examine school admissions criteria, school principals were selected as they are most likely to provide the information relevant to this issue.

[Please insert Table 1 about here]

In-depth interviews with five school principals, six school teachers and 42 pupils (Table 1) were conducted. They were either the implementers or the target groups of the policy. These interviewees came from five schools. There were two primary schools and three secondary schools. Two schools were located near the city centres, while the other three were in the suburban areas (Table 1). All the teachers interviewed were teaching or had previously taught migrant pupils.

The fieldwork took place during the summer vacation. The six teachers in the five schools first contacted the pupils in their classes by telephone and invited those who were available and willing to participate in the research to come to schools. These children were divided into migrant pupils with rural *hukou* and urban pupils with urban *hukou*. Then they were separately and randomly selected for interviews. Among 42 pupils, 36 were migrant pupils and six were urban pupils. Fewer urban pupils were recruited in the interviews because they were not the primary focus of the analysis, but were interviewed to enable triangulation of the responses made by migrant pupils and teachers. The primary school pupils were in Grade Five and between 10 and 11 years old, and the secondary school pupils were in Grades Seven and Eight and between 12 and 14 years old. There were 18 male and 24 female pupils (Table 2).

The questions asked in the interviews centred on different parts of education policy for migrant children, which include school admissions criteria, non-segregation of pupils, and academic support. With regard to school principals and teachers, the questions focused on how they implemented the policy, and what factors affected

their decisions and actions. With regard to pupils, the questions focused on how they were affected by schools' decisions and actions. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4) with the assistance of Nvivo. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of interviewees have been replaced with codes.

[Please insert Table 2 about here]

Research Findings

This section reports the main findings. It starts by describing the examination-oriented nature of the Chinese education system and its important role in policy implementation based on evidence from the two cities. Then, in the following three subsections, it examines how the examination-oriented education system in China affects the implementation of different parts of education policy for migrant children, namely equal admissions policy, non-segregation policy and academic support policy.

An Examination-Oriented Education System

The interviews demonstrated that examination results are the single most important factor affecting implementation of education policies at the school level. In particular, the standardised graduation examinations carried out at the end of primary or junior secondary education are closely related to the interests of schools. This is a factor that all schools take into account during the process of decision making and policy implementation. Indeed, it is such an important factor that the education system in China has been regarded as an examination-oriented system (*yingshi jiaoyu zhidu)*.

This means that almost every activity taking place in the education system revolves around achieving better results in graduation examinations (Zhou, 2001; Shangguan, 2003; Chen, 2004; Wu and Shen, 2006; Lu et al., 2007; Liu, 2008).

The importance of examination results to schools is twofold. First of all, the examination results are one of the most important indicators used by local governments to assess the performance of local schools and school principals. In those schools where pupils attain better examination results, the principals are more likely to be rewarded or promoted.

The close relationship between examination results and the career prospects of school principals is reflected in the regulations published by local governments. The *Implementation Plan of School Leadership Assessment* published by the Education Bureau of District Y in city B (2007) lists a number of indicators which are used to assess the performance of schools. Among others issues, the document states that "the emphasis of assessment is placed upon the 'substantive performance' (*gongzuo shiji*) of schools" (Article 2). The term "substantive performance" has two key elements: the enrolment rate and the examination results of pupils. The career prospects of principals are heavily reliant on the results of assessment. As stated in the *Temporary Methods of Principal Management of District Y in City B*: "the results of school assessment are important standards for rewards, sanctions, promotion or demotion of principals" (Education Bureau of District Y in City B, 2008, Article 31).

The assessment and promotion standards in city A are very much the same. According to the *School Assessment Plan of District Y in City A* (Education Bureau of District Y

in City A, 2008), school performance is scored in accordance with the proportion of pupils in the schools that pass or excel in the graduation examinations. In particular, Article 4 of the document set out the rewards and sanctions corresponding to different assessment scores. Those school principals who are assessed as excellent or good will be "rewarded with extra bonuses and praised publicly within the education system". Those principals who fail the assessment will have their bonuses cut. Those principals with the lowest scores in the assessment for two consecutive years will be subject to both economic and administrative sanctions.

Second, the examination results can affect a school's reputation. Schools with higher examination scores are labelled by parents as good schools, while those with lower scores are labelled as bad schools. This is exemplified in the interview with Teacher F:

> School HT is the best school in city B.…The general public generally believes so. Everybody says so.…First of all, it has the highest school admissions score. Second, the examination results of pupils in that school are also very good.

Principal D in School E expressed similar views:

> Every family wants their sons or daughters to be successful. If a school cannot guarantee good examination results for the pupils, who will study in this school?

Since the examination results are associated with the career prospects of principals and the reputation of schools, schools compete fiercely with each other for better results, and school activities are examination-oriented. The fieldwork found that these

school activities could be broadly classified into two categories: those related to personnel and those related to teaching.

First, with regard to personnel, the assessment system based on examination results also applies to staff in schools. It is conventional practice for schools to relate rewards, sanctions and promotion to the quality of teachers, which is measured by the examination results. For example, School C published the *Measures on Rewards and Sanctions related to Education Quality*, which explained various types of rewards and sanctions related to examination results. "If the classes' average scores in any subjects are ranked as the first, the second or the third in the same grade, the class teachers would be rewarded with ￥200(£20), ￥100(£10) and ￥80(£8) respectively" (School C, 2008, Article 4.1). Those teachers who can achieve higher examination scores are more likely to be promoted in schools. If a teacher wants to apply for higher teaching titles, he or she has to be subject to an assessment of his or her teaching quality. "The applicants must first and foremost report their substantive performance in teaching in the application…" (School C, 2011, Article 2.2). In other words, if a class teacher wants to get higher teaching titles, his or her class must get better examination results.

Second, teaching activities revolve around examination results. Every year, local governments in both cities publish the *Guidelines on Graduation Examinations* (*kaoshi dagang*) which outline the key points to be examined in the examinations. In order to get better academic results, schools and teachers strictly follow the *Guidelines*. Those subjects and knowledge mentioned in the *Guidelines* are classified as key subjects (*zhuke*) (e.g. mathematics, Chinese and English) or key points. Teachers spend a lot of time to teach the key subjects and explain the key points, so

that pupils can fully understand these key points and get a high score in the examinations. In contrast, those that are outside the scope of the *Guidelines* (i.e. they will not be examined in the graduation examinations) will be briefly mentioned or may even be omitted in classes. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

> It is exam-oriented teaching after all. What I teach in classes depends on what you examine in the examinations. (Teacher E, School B)

> …[E]ducation now is rather pragmatic… Especially for those teachers in charge of graduation classes, we require their teaching to be conservative. What is taught in the classes will strictly follow what is expected to be examined. (Teacher F, School D)

It is found in the interviews with the pupils at the five schools that it is normal practice to hold in-term examinations, which are also known as mock examinations. The pupils must participate in these examinations. The frequency of in-term examinations varies from one school to another, and in-term examinations are much more frequent in middle schools than in primary schools. In some cases, "there are examinations every month". (Teacher E, School B)

The main reason for holding in-term examinations is to make sure that the pupils are well-prepared for the graduation examinations. These mock examinations are carefully designed by experienced school teachers who are familiar with the examination system. For example, Middle School D formed an Education Research Group (ERG) (*jiaoyanzu*) in order to improve pupils' academic results. An important part of ERG's work was to analyse and predict examination papers and then design mock examination papers. As Teacher E supervising the ERG explained in the interview:

> [A] huge effort has been made to analyse the graduation examinations…We need to build up the ability to analyse the examination papers. … We not only analyse the examination papers of the last year, but also the past few years and then work out the patterns hidden behind the examination papers. Only in this way can we make sure our pupils are more confident in graduation examinations.

Implementation of Equal Admissions Criteria Policy

As discussed earlier, government policy requires that urban schools should apply equal school admissions criteria for urban and migrant children. In particular, urban schools should not use examination results to select migrant pupils (State Council, 2003a; National People's Congress, 2006). However, the interviews with both pupils and teachers revealed that selection by examination is very common.

In those areas where migrant families are concentrated, the number of migrant children far exceeds the spaces available in urban schools. For example, Primary School A had 180 study places for new pupils in 2009, but there were more than 300 applicants that year (Principal B, School A). Meanwhile, some migrant children may attend rural schools initially, and come to cities with their parents when they are older. However, schools fill up to capacity quickly in the first year and there are far fewer places for older migrant pupils. For example, as a conventional practice, Primary School B only took in four pupils each year among those migrant applicants who are in Grade Two or above (Teacher E, School B).

In both cases above, urban schools are oversubscribed. Their response to this problem is that they set up separate examinations for migrant children and "select in" those children with high test scores. The following quotes are typical among migrant

children. “You can…apply for the school that you want to go to. Of course, whether or not you can attend that school depends on your examination scores” (Pupil AE). “…if we want to attend a specific school, we have to take the examinations of that school” (Pupil AU). “You have to take the examinations if you want to attend that school. As long as your examination scores are good, you can attend that school” (Pupil BB).

School teachers and principals pointed out in the interviews that some migrant children are behind with their studies. The schools do not want to be overburdened helping these migrant children or to have their standards lowered by these children. So the schools use separate examinations to select better pupils:

> Only good pupils were enrolled…I do not mean they behave well or anything. It is just that they can catch up with their study and we do not have to worry about them too much. And they demonstrated good ability….It is because our school could not take in all the [migrant] applicants. For instance, we had 10 study places left but there were 100 applicants. We would hold examinations and recruit some good pupils. We had no other choice but to select by academic merit. (Teacher C, School A)

> As long as they meet the certificate requirements, they can apply [for study places in our school]. Then we will hold examinations to select those good pupils…We have no other choice. (Principal A, School C)

If a migrant pupil cannot find a study place via school examinations, the parents have to pay extra fees if they still want their child to study in an urban school. Even though the central government forbids the schools from charging extra fees (State Council, 2003b; National People's Congress, 2006), the teachers admitted in the interviews that this is still very common in both cities. According to Teacher E in Primary School B,

migrant children on average need to pay for ￥25,000 (£2,500) to secure a place in an urban school. For those schools with better reputation, the demand for study places is higher and thus the fees are higher. "For those schools, ￥25,000 is not enough. There is a long queue waiting for study places. Someone may pay for a higher amount of money and secure a place there" (Teacher E, Primary School B).

Implementation of Non-Segregation Policy

Non-segregation is an important part of the education policy for migrant children. The central government policy requires urban schools to educate migrant children in the same classes. Segregation of pupils is not allowed (State Council, 2003b; State Council, 2006). None of the schools reported placing migrant children in separate classes. Equally, none of the pupils reported the existence of such classes. The proportions of migrant children vary from one class to another. Because migrant families are more concentrated in suburban areas, the proportions of migrant children per class are higher in suburban schools. For example, School E is near the city centre. The interviews with the pupils and the school principal suggest that 30% - 50% of pupils in this school are migrant children. In comparison, the interviews with the pupils in School C which is located in suburban areas show that the proportions of migrant children are often above 50%. In some extreme cases, there may be only four or five urban children in one class (Pupil BC).

The teachers in all three middle schools reported that the examination scores are the only factor that the schools consider in relation to pupil allocation. They reported that this is a common practice in junior secondary schools in the cities concerned. After the pupils are admitted to a school they are ranked in accordance with the scores they

get in the graduation examinations of primary education. The school then allocates the pupils to different classes evenly in accordance with their rankings: the aim is for classes to be mixed ability. None of the principals and teachers reported they allocate the pupils on the basis of the *hukou* status. But Teacher F in School D did point out that the *hukou* status is a factor worth consideration in pupil allocation.

> Whether we should factor this in is a challenge to us. In the future, maybe we should consider whether to factor it in so that migrant pupils will not be too concentrated in some classes.

The evidence above shows that the policy in relation to non-segregation has been effectively implemented. However, it should be noted that the effective implementation of non-segregation policy is closely related to the examination-oriented education system. Although the policy goal of non-segregation is achieved, this is not because local schools intentionally mixed urban and migrant children in the same classes, but rather because pupil allocation is solely based on examination results. In practice, the evidence from this study suggests that there is no segregation of pupils according to migrant status using this allocation method.

Academic Difficulties Facing Migrant Children and Implementation of Academic Support Policy

The interviews with migrant children revealed that they did encounter difficulties in their studies while they were in urban schools. Some reported that they lagged behind urban students in their studies. This is especially the case for those migrant children who did not start their education in urban schools at the very beginning of compulsory education but came to cities when they were older.

This issue is related to unequal educational standards between rural and urban schools. Due to the huge economic gap between rural and urban areas, educational standards in rural schools are much lower than those in urban schools (Liu, 2008). Therefore, when rural children migrate to cities, some of them find that their academic abilities are below the average level of urban schools. Others find that they do not have as good a foundation as urban pupils. In particular, some migrant children reported that they had difficulties in understanding what the teachers are talking about in class. "When I first came to school, my study was not good, because the knowledge that was being taught here was different from what I had learnt in my hometown school" (Pupil AG). Teacher B in School A raised the same issue in the course of interview: "I have a pupil who came to this [primary] school when he was 9 years old and in Grade 3. He learnt very little before he came here. In three years in rural schools, he had mastered very little knowledge."

It was reported that migrant children find themselves lagging behind most of all in English which is meant to be a compulsory course in all schools in China. "I could not speak English when I was here at first. I did not learn English in primary school, so I could not catch up at first" (Pupil AX). Urban pupil AT also reported this issue: "we started to learn English from Grade One…Some of my migrant classmates started to learn English in Grade Three or even later. They have to concentrate on English first". Teacher C in School C confirmed this during the interview:

> There was a migrant pupil who told me he had never learnt English in his rural school. The urban pupils in our school had been studying English for years since primary schools. At that time, he knew nothing about English other than a handful of letters. He had to start from zero. (Teacher C, School C)

Catching up with peers appeared to be a challenge but did not necessarily constitute an insurmountable difficulty to migrant children. Indeed, the interviews with principals revealed that schools are willing to help these children. This is in line with the policy which requires urban schools to help migrant children who have difficulties in their studies and reduce the gap between the two groups of children (State Council, 2003b). It was found in the interviews that every school organises after-class sessions to help migrant children who are struggling with their studies. In some cases, the assistance takes the form of one-to-one tutoring between teachers or top-performing pupils and migrant children (Teacher C, School A; Teacher F, School D). In other cases, the schools set up evening classes for all struggling migrant pupils. Both one-to-one tutoring and evening classes were reported to be free of charge (Principal C, School C).

With support from school, it was reported that these children are able to catch up with peers. None of the migrant pupils felt they were still lagging behind in their studies when they were interviewed. However, some pupils did need more time than others to catch up with peers. For example, Pupil AG reported that it took him one year to catch up with his classmates, whereas Pupil AX reported that it took her three years to catch up. Nonetheless, it appears that lagging behind is a short-term issue.

The interviews suggest that the policy relating to academic support has been effectively implemented. Urban schools follow the requirements of the government and provide help to struggling pupils, and migrant pupils who were lagging behind at first are able to catch up later. However, it must be pointed out that the favourable measures aiming to help migrant children with their studies simply reflect the

examination-oriented behaviours of urban schools. Before 2001, local schools were not accountable for the examination results of migrant children, and whether or not migrant children achieved good examination results was irrelevant to the overall measure of urban schools' academic performance (Qu and Wang, 2008). Previous research has found that at that time urban schools often placed migrant children in separate classes with no favourable measures to help migrant children with their studies (Lv and Zhang, 2001). After 2001, government policy required local schools to treat urban and migrant children equally. Once migrant children have been accepted by an urban school, the examination results of these children are taken as part of the overall academic performance of that school. If migrant children can get high scores, this will improve schools' average scores. Consequently, school principals will have a better chance of being promoted or receiving a bonus. In this case, the educational outcomes of migrant children and the reputation of urban schools are linked together. It is in the interests of urban schools to help migrant children to achieve better examination results.

Discussion

This paper has investigated the implementation of education policy for migrant children in the Chinese context. The main policy goal is to ensure that migrant children have equal opportunities in urban schools. Equal opportunity in education is a highly contested concept and has different meanings in different contexts. With regard to education policy for migrant children, it involves equal school admissions criteria; non-segregation; and provision of academic support to reduce the achievement gap between the two groups of children. This paper aimed to answer two research questions. First, has education policy for migrant children been effectively

implemented? Second, what are the factors affecting effective implementation or non-implementation of this policy?

The empirical evidence collected from two provincial capitals in China suggests that education policy for migrant children has been partially implemented. Some policy goals have been achieved, while others have not. On the one hand, equal admissions criteria policy is being poorly implemented. The policy forbids urban schools to select pupils by examination results and charge migrant children extra fees. However, in practice, migrant children have to achieve high examination scores before they can study in urban schools. Otherwise, they have to pay extra fees. On the other hand, non-segregation and academic support policies appear to have been effectively implemented. Migrant and urban children study in the same classes and go through the same assessment system. Urban schools provide academic support to those migrant children struggling in their studies. There is evidence to suggest that they can catch up with their peers with schools' help.

Previous research has argued that government-level factors such as policy funding and the *hukou* system are key factors affecting the implementation of education policy for migrant children (Zhou, 2006, 2007; Qian and Geng, 2007; Li, 2009). By way of contrast – and notwithstanding the importance of government-level factors – this paper has focused on the hitherto largely ignored issue of school-level factors. The interviews with principals, teachers and pupils show that the exam-oriented education system is the most important school-level factor affecting the implementation of education policy for migrant children.

First, in order to maintain or improve their academic performance, urban schools set up separate examinations and select those pupils with high academic ability. Second, migrant and urban pupils are put in the same classes; this is not because schools intentionally mix the two groups of pupils together, but a result of allocating children by examination results. Finally, schools provide academic support to migrant children, because this is conducive to lifting the overall academic performance of schools.

The migration of rural children to cities brings about two major challenges to urban schools: first they do not have enough study places for migrant children; and second they have to seek to ensure that the recruitment of migrant children does not lower the overall academic performance of school. Because education policies do not specify how the government should supervise and evaluate policy implementation, schools have much latitude to make their own decisions. In other words, the policies are formulated in a way that allows schools to make adaptations in policy implementation to pursue their own interests or meet specific challenges they face. When policy implementers are left to make adaptations with little constraint, implementation failure might follow.

Given room for adaptive implementation, the results of policy implementation are heavily dependent upon whether or not the policy goals conflict with the objectives reflected in the examination-oriented education system. If a policy goal is in accord with the examination-oriented education system, the policy will be effectively implemented. Otherwise, non-implementation tends to happen. Put differently, when policies goals are conflicting with each other, the policies with strong incentives

prevail, and are consequently implemented, while the policies with weak incentives have to give way to those "strong" polices, and thus are left unimplemented.

Examination-oriented education is closely associated with high-stakes testing systems (Tymms, 2004). There have been debates on its advantages and disadvantages in the American and English education systems (See Amrein and Berliner, 2002). One issue which had drawn many writers' attention is that high-stakes testing with its strong incentives might have unintended consequences (West and Pennell, 2000). The proponents of high-stakes testing argue that such a system can help reduce inequality in education, because pupils' learning process and study progress can be objectively assessed by examination scores, and family background tends to play a minor role in the assessment. This is argued to be the case with pupils from disadvantaged families (e.g. families with low socioeconomic status) (Hursh, 2005, pp.609-611). However, high-stakes testing with the aim of reducing educational inequality might bring about new forms of educational inequality and can paradoxically "further disadvantage already disadvantaged pupils" (Smith and Fey, 2000, p.334).

Similar tensions as a result of high-stakes testing are also apparent in the Chinese context. As shown in this paper, the examination-oriented education system facilitates the implementation of academic support policy in the sense that migrant pupils who have difficulties with their studies receive help in urban schools. However, such a system brings about new difficulties for migrant pupils. Schools in China are held accountable for achieving good academic results and thus face pressure to achieve this goal, which is very similar to the situation faced by English schools (West et al.,

2011). In the case of education for migrant children, schools pass down this pressure to migrant pupils by setting up entrance examinations and mock examinations.

High stakes testing is a policy instrument with strong incentives and may produce complicated, unexpected or even contradictory results in the course of policy implementation. In particular, it tends to aggravate inequality in the education system. Since 2001, the Chinese government has started a new round of education reform aimed at promoting "educational equality" in the education system (State Council, 2001). The policy implication of the research reported here is that, when formulating new policies, policy makers should be acutely aware of the impact of high stakes testing, and take measures to avoid the overarching objective of the reform – in this case educational equality – being undermined by it.

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Tables

Table 1 Interviewees and Schools

	City A	City B	Total
Interviewees			
Principals	3	2	5
Teachers	4	2	6
Students	27	15	42
Total	34	19	53
Schools			
Primary School	Primary School A	Primary School B	2
Middle School	Middle School C Middle School E	Middle School D	3
Total	3	2	5

Table 2 Student Interviewees

	City A	City B	Total
Gender			
Male	12	6	18
Female	15	9	24
***Hukou* Status**			
Rural *Hukou*	23	13	36
Urban *Hukou*	4	2	6
Grade			
5(age:10-11)	8	7	15
7(age: 12-13)	8	5	13
8(age:13-14)	11	3	14
Total	27	15	42